



Sequoia Insurance Company

RISK ALERT

March 2007

Understanding Lock Bumping

Lock bumping is a means of opening a pin tumbler lock (the most common type) by using a specially modified “bump key” and a mallet or other striking device. When the key is slid into the lock, turned slightly, then “bumped” with the mallet, the tumblers inside the lock briefly shake into the “open” position, allowing the bolt to be turned and the lock opened. The entire process takes only a few seconds and leaves almost no indication of forced entry.

Lock bumping (“key bumping” or “bump keying”) is illegal except when done by a licensed locksmith. It has been used legitimately by locksmiths and lock hobbyists for many years, but until recently has been largely unknown to the public. In 2005, detailed information – including videos and details on how to make or buy the tools – appeared on the Internet, raising concerns among law enforcement and security professionals, lawmakers, and the general public.

The modified “bump key” (also called a “depth key” or “999” key) is made from a single key with a keyway, or pattern of grooves, common to the lock(s) at the target property. The key is reshaped to render a generic profile which will fit all locks made with that keyway. (Keyless locks, jimmy-proof locks, biometric locks, electronic locks, magnetic locks, and locks using rotating disks are not vulnerable to lock bumping.)

Because many (or all) locks in a commercial building, apartment complex, mailbox center, or home may use the same keyway, criminals may break into many properties using just one modified “bump key” and a hammer. About a dozen common keyways – from brands such as Kwikset, Schlage, Yale, Dexter, Weiser, and Master Lock – are targeted by thieves. Illegal suppliers have already started offering inexpensive ready-made bump keys for these and other brands. Anyone can purchase a set of bump keys online for less than twenty dollars, along with hammer tools and how-to guides.

What’s the Risk?

It is difficult to determine if the recent torrent of alarmist news stories and email warnings is proportionate to the actual number of break-ins related to lock bumping. Because lock bumping leaves almost no evidence of forced entry, it can be impossible to know if it has actually been used. One source reports that in more than half the time lock bumping is attempted, it doesn’t work. The National Crime Prevention Council and the Department of Justice report that nearly two thirds of

all break-ins occur with no sign of forced entry, but two-thirds of these involve doors or windows left open. Certainly the risk is real, though, and more is at stake than home invasion or burglary. Public and private post office boxes are also vulnerable to lock bumping, thus placing in jeopardy the privacy, security, and identities of box renters. The U.S. Post Office uses the same lock type in all its offices across the country. Blank keyways, locks, and keys of the sort used by the Post Office are available for sale over the Internet. And Post Office customers may obtain blank keys upon request.

Assess Your Situation

- Consult a professional locksmith to determine what kind of locks are on your doors.
- If necessary, upgrade to high-security locks, which have extra locking features within the cylinder that make bumping more difficult. Recommended brands include Schlage Primus, Assa, and Medeco or Mul-T-Lock (sister companies).
- Choose high security locks that meet the “Standard for Key Locks” (UL427) from Underwriters Laboratories. These locks are available only through locksmiths or from manufacturers’ representatives. Expect to pay more for better locks.
- When installing high-security locks, reinforce door jambs to prevent intruders from kicking in the door (made easier with a heavy-duty lock).
- If your operation is located within a larger complex, consider changing all your locks to make them different from others in the area.
- Consider using only registered keys and locks. For example, Primus supplies keys and locks that work only with each other, and customers may obtain extra keys only if they present an identification card issued to them at the time the original lockset was purchased, or if their name has been approved by the original purchaser or property owner.

Consider Overall Security

- Implement an overall premises security program, with sufficient lighting, fences, and alarm system.
- Disable outside key access for all doors but one, and install high-security locks on that door. (Be sure that all the other doors still open readily from the inside.)
- Implement a key inventory and control program. Collect and destroy old keys.
- Get to know your neighbors. Look out for each other, and take note of any strangers on the premises, especially outside normal business hours.

For more information about managing your business risks, call Sequoia Loss Control at 831-657-4507